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SUBJECT: BULGARIA IN THE EU: STILL FINDING ITS WAY

Classified By: A/DCM Brad Freden for reasons 4.1 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Bulgaria's recent accession to the EU has fueled speculation over what sort of member it will be--passive or active--and what priorities it will have in the Union. Many observers expect Bulgaria to continue its pre-accession approach of being cautious, flexible and non-confrontational on most EU-related political issues. Sofia has modest ambitions in the EU and will seek to be in the mainstream on most issues, say experts. The two areas where Bulgaria is likely to see more of a role for itself in the EU are the Western Balkans and the Black Sea Basin. Both Bulgaria and the Union have a strong interest in creating a zone of stable and prosperous states on Bulgaria's--and now the EU's--external borders. As a small country that is almost entirely dependent on Russian energy imports, Bulgaria suffers more than most from the lack of a common EU energy policy. END SUMMARY.

AIMING FOR THE EU MAINSTREAM; WITH A FEW PET ISSUES

12. (C) Bulgaria has reached the 100-day mark of its EU membership. While the country is still finding its feet in Brussels, our best estimation is that Sofia will seek to stay "in the middle of the pack" on most EU issues. As Gergana Grancharova, the newly-appointed EU Minister, told the Ambassador recently: most Bulgarians (officials included) still do not have the self-confidence to believe their country can play a role on the world scene. We spoke to a number of respected experts who share this view and the expectation that Bulgaria will be a passive and risk-averse EU member. Most notable among them is Krassimir Nikolov, whose institute--the Bulgarian European Community Studies Association--closely tracks Bulgaria's positions on key EU issues. He sees Bulgaria as taking pains to avoid standing out on any one issue. According to him, Sofia has consistently avoided taking a firm or outspoken stand on controversial issues that divide member states, such as the EU Constitution. Bulgaria has expressed concrete views only on relatively non-contentious issues and prefers to follow a moderate, consensus-seeking approach.

13. (SBU) Sofia's cautious approach prior to membership can be explained partly by its preoccupation with on-time accession. To this end, Bulgaria concentrated on completing its accession "homework" and left the EU to deal with its own internal problems. But most experts claim Bulgaria does not have strong leadership ambitions and has historically been a "follower" not a leader. They expect the country to act the same after accession and to be mostly passive. There are exceptions, of course, like the case of the Bulgarian nurses jailed in Libya and the closure of the Kozloduy nuclear

reactors, which Bulgaria appears determined to press within the EU. But, apart from these parochial issues, even strong external pressure may not be enough to get Bulgaria to take the lead on contentious issues, argues Nikolov. Ivan Krustev, Director of the well-respected Center for Liberal Strategies, similarly expects Bulgaria to gravitate automatically towards whatever consensus exists in the EU on a particular issue. He says Bulgaria is not interested so much in the "content" of issues as it is in finding or following the consensus. Both he and Nikolov believe Bulgaria's politicians are eager to give the impression of being in the mainstream, and to be seen as being constructive and not causing problems.

FURTHER ENLARGMENT IN THE BALKANS A PRIORITY

14. (SBU) To the extent Bulgaria has priorities in the EU, they are likely to derive from a mixture of national interests and increasing responsibility as the EU's new external border. Bulgaria has a pronounced interest in the Western Balkans and regards further enlargement in the region as vital to its strategic interest. Sofia insists on keeping a clear "European perspective" for the Western Balkans and sees this as the best framework for ensuring regional stability and prosperity. The delay in the integration of Sofia's Western neighbors has a direct bearing on Bulgaria's own economic welfare. Serbia is Bulgaria's natural landbridge to Europe for trade and commerce, and some officials fear the visas Sofia must now impose on its non-EU neighbors to the West will only slow the growth in regional economic relations. Given the benefits Bulgaria sees for itself in further expansion, Sofia is likely to remain one of the more enthusiastic supporters of enlargement in Brussels.

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At the same time, Bulgaria is mindful of "enlargement fatigue" among older member states and will no doubt recognize that pushing hard for accession in the face of resistance is not productive or advantageous to its own standing in the EU.

15. (SBU) Support for Turkish accession is more ambiguous. Most officials say Turkish membership--and the modernization that comes with it--is in the interest of Bulgaria as a neighboring country "provided Ankara fulfills all of the necessary requirements." In truth, Bulgaria has not yet had an official or public debate on Turkey's bid, but most experts believe politicians will be divided over the issue when it comes to the fore. There are many skeptics, especially among the center-right, including former Prime Minister Ivan Kostov's party and the influential analyst Ogynan Minchev. They argue Bulgaria, with its sizable Turkish population and close proximity, will be the EU country most affected by Turkish membership, particularly demographically. These fears are closely tied to negative feelings towards the mostly-ethnic Turkish MRF party, which is regarded as corrupt, and which has a political monopoly over the country's Turkish population. But the "well-informed public" recognizes that a EU rejection of Turkey would push Turkey in a direction that would be bad for Bulgarian interests, argues Minchev.

LOOKING TO CONTRIBUTE IN THE BLACK SEA

16. (SBU) The Black Sea is another area where Bulgaria is focusing greater attention and has expressed a desire to play an active role as part of the EU's European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). As with the Western Balkans, Sofia would like to see a ring of stable, prosperous countries on its eastern shores. This goal is consistent with the ENP's aim of avoiding a new dividing line across Europe. Bulgaria has good relations with most of the Black Sea countries and has

signed cooperation agreements related to Euro-Atlantic integration with Georgia and Ukraine as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan. According to Nikolov, Bulgaria traditionally has looked at the Black Sea through a lense of either security (primarily NATO) or concern for the welfare of its diasporas in countries like Ukraine and Moldova. But as Bulgarian accession brings the EU's borders to the shores of the Black Sea, the country appears to be taking on greater responsibility for the region. The government is working to finalize a policy paper that will define its priorities towards the region and reportedly take a more holistic approach towards the neighborhood.

WHOSE TEAM WILL THEY JOIN?

¶7. (C) Bulgaria will be challenged to dispel notions among many member states that it will be Russia's "Trojan horse" inside the EU. Moscow's Ambassador to Brussels used the term in an interview to describe how Russia intends to rely on Bulgaria to be its "special partner" in the EU. Noting how external EU decisions are based on consensus, the Russian Ambassador said Bulgaria could help Moscow by "calming the crazy votes" (i.e., Poland) while "encouraging" the undecided voters on Russia-related matters. EU-wide polls indeed show Bulgaria as being the most Russia-friendly country in the Union, according to Ivan Krustev. However, this cultural and historical affinity extends less and less to politics, as Bulgaria has reoriented its foreign policy decisively toward the West over the last decade. Bulgaria also recognizes that Russia has little to offer it economically beyond a one-sided trade relationship based on energy. Russian business interests, however, do have a strong foothold. Most of these appear to fall somewhere on the continuum from "non-transparent" (i.e., in the energy sector) to outright criminal. Bulgaria appears willing to support Brussels' efforts to agree to a common energy policy, particularly if that means weakening Europe and Bulgaria's dependency on Russian energy.

¶8. (SBU) Among the original members, Bulgaria has strong historic and economic ties with Germany, where many Bulgarian students study abroad. Others see Bulgaria as joining the newer, mostly former communist, EU members in a natural alliance against the bigger and older members. Nikolov, however, considers this notion of "natural allies" in the EU as misguided, arguing that most coalitions in the EU are issue-based. He sees cooperation between older and newer members as being more likely. According to him, Bulgaria has

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little experience in building coalitions and has rarely been regarded as an "equal" partner given its history of foreign occupation and domination. Sofia will need some time to learn the Union's unique form of multilateral horse-trading in order to defend its interests. As the EU member state most dependent on Russia for its energy needs, Bulgaria could potentially be a natural leader on this issue, and we should continue trying to push them in this direction.

¶9. (SBU) Bulgaria, which ratified the Constitution at the same time as its Accession Treaty, has avoided wading into the larger argument on the next steps, after the French and Dutch rejection, and is awaiting the results of the EU's "reflection" period. Prime Minister Stanishev recently said Bulgaria supports the text of the Constitution agreed upon in October 2004 and thinks the core of the Constitution should not be modified. Bulgaria has aligned itself with the EU on issues like Kyoto and the ICC while trying to avoid a clash between European (i.e., European Security and Defense Policy) and Euro-Atlantic (i.e., NATO) foreign policy imperatives. Sofia supports increasing the EU's role in international peace and security operations through ESDP but insists these efforts should complement NATO's actions and strengthen the trans-Atlantic link. Similarly, Bulgaria is supportive of

the Common Foreign and Security Policy, which it sees as improving the external action and effectiveness of the EU.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Getting Bulgaria to be more active and outspoken on issues important to us will be a challenge given Sofia's default mode of "go-along/get-along." The gravitational pull of Brussels is only expected to increase with Bulgaria's continuing integration and greater dependency on EU funds. By putting the pressure on Bulgaria to aim higher than EU mainstream, we can help Sofia to better defend its own interests while also reinforcing the trans-Atlantic link.
BEYRLE